

when it was clear that he did not intend to respond, it continued, "But I fear that even then you would be unsatisfied."

"You can't help me?" said Ruig. "Is that what you mean?" He had not considered the possibility that this, an Oracle, would be unable to solve his problem. An Oracle always had the answer.

"I can offer help," it said, and Ruig relaxed a little. "But my analysis indicates that whatever is offered by a mere machine will be inadequate to your demands. There are times when the old ways are best. Interpersonal contact and the progress of time are two solutions that cannot be provided by an Oracle."

Ruig thought for a few minutes. "My parents," he said. "You have records, information?" He had not seen them in over a decade.

"Of course," said the Oracle. "Tre died three years ago by self-inflicted wounds, a ritual death supervised by officials from the Sheolat religious cult. Alcaj is alive..."

The Oracle gave Ruig details of where his surviving parent lived in the city of Oxfer and Ruig decided to go there immediately.

"If you are me and I am the impostor," Ruig said to the Traveller, before leaving him with the boy in the room donated to them by a sycophantic Oxfer hotelier, "then why are you prepared to follow where I lead? Why did you sit back when I put on the robes of the Witness to mediate at Scawltter?"

Ruig, the other, smiled, and said, "Because that is my nature, where yours is to dictate and dominate. Is that sufficient answer?" The ease with which the traveller deflected all Ruig's questions only served to undermine what confidence he had retained. Even the Oracle had been unable to tell him if he was the real Alcaj Ruig Tre or an impostor.

He left the hotel and strode through the crowded streets of the city in a fit of anger. Seeing his Witness's outfit, people parted like water flowing around a post, yet that merely deepened his gloom. If only they would close around him, let him join the mass, the jostle and bustle, he felt that he could at least be reassured of his own humanity.

He found the district by relying on memory, and then his signaller guided him to the address the Oracle had given. It was a shabby building, built of brick, with crumbling white rendering; the door stood open and screaming children ran in and out, chasing a small dog that had been augmented with the head of a wolf and the eyes of a cat. He brushed past their small hurrying bodies, smiling at their touch, the implication that they had not yet marked him as different to any other. A woman glared at him from along the corridor. Perhaps she had seen his pleasure at the children's touch and she feared for them, knowing that a Witness usually got what he wanted.

He climbed the steep stairs, shallowly breathing the air that smelt of urine and old cabbages.

The door hung crookedly, partly open. "Hello," he called, hoping that there would be no reply and that he could go quickly from this place.

The door creaked back and a small, hunched woman stared out. Her face was wrinkled and sagging,

her eyes that horribly familiar, piercing blue. Her hair was sandy grey, tied back with strands loose across her brow, her cheeks.

"Father," said Ruig, uncertainly. "It's me: Ruig."

His father stepped back into the room, pulling the door wider open and indicating that Ruig should enter. "It's a mess," she said, her tone as unapologetic as it had been when its pitch was lower.

"It always was," said Ruig, entering the room, looking about at the books, the tangled bed linen, the small wall-screen blabbering silently out at him. He looked at his father. "You've changed," was all he could think to say.

Alcaj chuckled, and somehow the sound made Ruig relax. It sounded right. "Let's drink," she said, heading for a half-empty bottle on a table, wiping glasses with fingers and then the hem of her long shirt.

Ruig couldn't take his eyes off his father. The two sat and drank, catching up on the lost years. In the past his father had been uncommunicative, a morose man whose longest sentence was two grunts instead of one. Now, Ruig was amazed that it was all so easy; he was discovering a relationship he had never known before, he had thought there was little left to surprise him in the world, but he had been wrong. Finally, Ruig asked, "How long have you been a woman, father?"

"Six years."

"I wish I'd been here at the time." But he knew that he would have done the wrong thing, at the time: it had to be presented to him whole, like this.

"No," said his father. "I needed space of my own. Tre had left, you had left... I had time to think. It's troubled me all my adult life, I realized. I went to a Caster, before my mind was made, and he questioned me until my head was ringing and whatever progress I had made was shattered by his casting of doubts. It took me another year before I decided." Alcaj looked at Ruig, now, and then looked out of the window as if he could see back across the years. "There's a time when you stop asking questions, Ruig," she concluded. "A time when suddenly it doesn't matter any more, because you just know who you are."

And as the old woman looked out of her tenement window, and Ruig gazed into her faraway eyes, he suddenly started to see, to understand.

When he returned to the room given to them by the hotelier he had half-expected Boy and Ruig, the other, to have gone, but they were still there. The other smiled at him, but this time it did not have the usual unsettling effect.

Boy was perched at the open window, looking down over the street. Ruig squatted before him and waited until his child had turned to meet his gaze. "How long?" asked Ruig. "How long have you resented me like this?" And he saw from the expression on that small, warped face that he was right.

He turned before Boy could respond. He pulled his Witness's cloak from his bag and tied it at his throat. He placed the cap on his head. And then he turned to face his son and the impostor. "Now," he said. "How long?"

His son started to chuckle in his half-human language, restricted by the changes to his vocal cords and his thorax. Then Ruig, the impostor, raised a hand

"Have you come here to finger someone?"

"Of course not. I don't know who torched the place or why – I was off shift, tucked up in bed. If I hadn't been, I guess I might be dead. But there are some crazies around, you know, and there was a certain amount of talk about what certain people thought the good people of Ashton ought to do about the germ-factory on the ridge, and some of those certain people now want to keep a low profile. I told anyone who'd listen that the germ-factory stuff was all nonsense, of course, but no one believed me. Anyhow, I didn't want it noised around that I'd gone running to you the moment you came into town."

He shrugged. "I'm not here to chase the people who did it. I'm just here to make a report about the work Abel and Franklin were doing – not that it's going to be easy. Whoever wiped out the labs did a very thorough job."

"Abel and Frankin are both dead, Dr Carmichael. So are the apes. They were in quarantine – they never got out."

"What apes?" he asked carefully.

"You must know about the apes" she replied equally carefully. She squinted at him through the polished lenses, and it was obvious that they were both wondering how much the other knew.

"To tell you the truth," he said, "Abel's reports may have been more than a little out of date. He wasn't always punctilious about making official reports on experiments in progress... I don't suppose anyone is. We all like to have the results in before we report to our masters. His working notes must have gone up in smoke, unless he kept back-up discs at some distant location. The only chance we have of finding out exactly where he was up to is to find someone who was actively involved – however limited their role might have been. Exactly what did you do, Miss...?"

"Vollman – Lucy Vollman," she said. He recognized the name from the list he'd scanned, but couldn't connect it to a role. "I started out as an equipment orderly," she added. "Bottle-washer, animal-handler and all-purpose spare pair of hands. They promoted me to technician when the people they had were recalled to war work." She must have seen his face fall, because she went on: "That doesn't mean that I'm a moron, Dr Carmichael. I was more than half way to working my way up to technician anyway. It can be done, you know."

He knew that she was right. Nobody tolerated fools in high-security labs. No matter how menial the tasks to be carried out, they had to be done efficiently and with intelligence.

"How much do you know?" he asked, sitting down on the bed and pointing to the armchair. She moved her wet coat to one side and sat down in it.

"He never began any human experiments," she said, without further procrastination. "He was probably disappointed with the way things went with the apes. There were just the three chimps – or what *had* been chimps. They're all dead, reduced to ashes. You do know about the chimps, don't you?"

Carmichael nodded.

"That's it, then," she said. "If you know about the chimps there's nothing more to tell." But she didn't make a move to get up out of the chair.

"I need to know exactly what happened to the

chimps," he said, as she had known that he would, "as accurately as you can tell me. I'd also like to know who else knew."

"I don't think anyone burned down the labs because of the apes," she said, mistaking the reason for his last inquiry. "Something may have slipped out about them – garbled, of course – but it wasn't the kind of horror story to excite firebugs. You know there are rumours flying around that the plagues were actually cooked up by the government, don't you? People whisper it back and forth that Washington is using them to wipe out the blacks, or the Hispanics, or the Californians while the rich hide out in their bunkers. They talk about international conspiracies of the rich against the poor, about human culling... all kinds of crazy stuff."

"It's all lies," said Carmichael, "but..."

"That's what most people say," she interrupted, "but what the crazies reply is, *how would you know?* And we wouldn't, would we? If things like that were going on, who'd tell the likes of us? Me, anyway."

"Who else do you know who might have information?"

"Less than half a dozen," she said. "Only two who worked on the inside. Nobody knows any more than I do, Dr Carmichael. I don't think any of the others is going to come tapping on your window, and I'm sure that none of them is going to march into the lobby and ask your soldier-boys where to find you."

"I need you to tell me where I can find the others," he said. "You all have to be properly debriefed."

"Forget it," she said. "This is it, Dr Carmichael. I can tell you everything there is to tell, and I'm not going to give you any names. You can go home to Washington but I live here. There really isn't anything to hunt around for. I'm sorry, but that's the way it is."

"Okay," he said. "Tell me what you know – about the project, and about the progress Abel and Franklin had made."

"I know about the jigsaw hypothesis," she said. "I may have been only a makeshift technician, but I know the general outline of it.

The entire solar system is made out of cosmic wreckage, right? All the heavy elements are debris from a series of burned out stars. Abel thought that DNA was debris too – that there's tons of the stuff out in deep space. He thinks that the evolution of life on earth has been – what did he call it? – a *re-collection*. He thought that there were pathways already laid down for natural selection, because what it's really doing isn't building from scratch but *re-building* something which already existed once before, millions of years ago and thousands of light years away. Like putting together a jigsaw of DNA. He thought that we might already have the next evolutionary phase mapped out within us, didn't he? He was trying to make those chimps *evolve* – and his ultimate aim was to try it out on people too, to turn us into supermen overnight. Except that I saw those chimps every day, Dr Carmichael, and whatever it was they'd become, it wasn't human. They changed, all right – but not into people."

Carmichael was relieved to discover that she knew as much as she did. Even so, she didn't quite have the idea in her grasp. "There's no reason to think the chimps would evolve into people," he told her.